

Digging a post hole is no gag

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—I'd been dreading this job all winter.

Two years ago, we had to take down a huge, silver maple that shaded our farmhouse. It was a favorite. It held up one end of our hammock. But I had to remove this dead tree before it fell on me, or worse, the house.

In the course of cutting it, several large limbs were dropped on one section of the chain-link fence that surrounds our yard and keeps Nellie, our Yellow Lab, from getting into neighborhood scrapes of her own making.

One oak fence post was broken and an eight-foot-long section of fence was irreparably crushed into an unsightly U.

I was angry that the professional tree trimmer had been so careless. I was also angry, because I was the one who was going to fix a mess that I hadn't made.

I nursed this grudge. I glared at the U in the fence four or five times a day so that I wouldn't forget that I was angry about it.

A certain farm resident, other than me, suggested that "we" replace the whole fence. A more sensible idea I could not imagine.

The current fence is aesthetically utilitarian at best. There's not much romantic, nostalgic or charming about chain links. It looks a little penal.

The 4x4 oak posts have been in the ground for at least 70 years. Several now wobble with old age. Their white paint is a largely faded memory.

There's a definite 1950s-era dog-kennel look about our front yard, which really has more to do with the resident dog than the resident fence.

We prefer a traditional, zigzag rail fence made of split chestnut logs. While these fences are said to have held cattle and sheep, I doubt one would contain Nellie who I've seen jump four feet high from a flat-footed stance on her way to a reverse dunk.

The yard-fencing options that would keep Nellie in and the occasional horse or cow out would require digging at least 50 36-inch-deep holes every seven linear feet.

A white picket fence would be nice, but it would take months to complete. Other farm holes would be left undug and miffed at being ignored.

Alternatives exist to digging post holes by hand. Why for \$1,500, I could get a tractor-mounted auger that won't work in our rocky soil. For half that, I could buy a two-person, gasoline-powered auger, which doesn't remove rocks and roots

but does a pretty good job puncturing plastic waterlines. The one-man, gasoline-powered auger works well on loose sand, of which the closest deposit is 200 miles away.

Options as compelling as these are not easily passed over, but I managed.

Instead of replacing the fence, I decided to cut out the U-shaped section, remove two old posts, install two eight-foot replacements and hang a 12-foot-long farm gate close enough to the ground to keep Nellie inbounds. A farm gate would allow trucks, tractors and heavy equipment to get close to the house, and you never know when this might come in handy.

I was dreading digging out the deeply sunk stubs of the old posts. The previous fence builder would have tamped excavated rocks next to each one, presumably to keep them from catting around at night with the sexy creosote girls up the road.

After stalling for two years, I decided that I had wrung out all of the righteous aggravation from the collapsed fence that was there to wring. So I went at it this week when the weather broke into the near-tropical 40s.

The three-foot-long stub of the first post resisted extraction like a bad tooth root unwilling to separate from its familiar jaw.

This meant that I had to dig the hole wider than the 10-inch diameter post I was putting in its place. Much wider. And the wider the hole, the more rocks I had to claw out.

When digging a post hole you have to decide how deep is deep enough. This is no different than researching a book. Shallower is easier; deeper is harder but better. Too shallow, and your post wiggles and your book flops. No one wants to be known for wiggles and flops.

Since my replacement post had to offset both the weight and torque of a swinging metal farm gate, I had to dig down the full 36 inches.

It took me two miserable hours to empty one hole and five minutes to fill it in with the post and loose dirt.

From this hole, I've pulled a life lesson.

Proper nursing of a grievance brings many benefits, not the least of which is delay that enriches the grudge and enlightens the bearer. Remedying a properly nursed grievance often falls on the aggrieved. Remedies involve aggravation and getting your hands dirty.

On Sunday night, I watched a "60 Minutes" segment on Bob Mankoff, cartoon editor for The New Yorker.

I knew Frank Modell, a New Yorker cartoonist between 1945 and 1997, when I was a graduate student in New York 47 years ago. He was keeping company with a recent Sarah Lawrence graduate who rented the apartment down

the hall and worked as a receptionist at the magazine. She was quite literary; I was quite not.

She had William Hamilton, the New Yorker cartoonist who's been skewering Manhattan's East Side Uppies for almost 50 years, draw dancing hippos on her bedroom wall one night in the late 1960s. On my wall, I had dancing roaches performing live.

Since I have no obvious (or unobvious) artistic talent, it never occurred to me to try a cartoon. But as Mankoff talked, I started drawing stick figures on a legal pad and coming up with lines that might just be snappy enough to make it as cartoons.

Shimmying hippos, though, are way beyond me.

Excavating a hole and working up a cartoon dig into unknown areas. You never know what might come up or how much work it will be.

Filling a hole goes quickly. Filling a blank page can take a long time.

A good gag cartoon goes by in a flash, but a filled hole can last forever.

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